

AMERICAN PREACHERS VISITING ASIAN CHURCHES

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We have spent fourteen years planting churches in Asia, and one of the greatest blessings has been to see the establishment of sound national churches which have continued with the work of God in our absence, supporting their own pastor, sending out their own evangelists to start new churches, and building their own buildings--all by the tithes and offerings of the members.

In 1996 we were asked what we think about American pastors or evangelists traveling to that part of the world on short visits under the umbrella of national church leaders. The following is our reply:

The need for Gospel preaching and church planting efforts in Asia is obviously great, but if the work of the Lord is not done wisely and scripturally it will not produce scriptural results. The following are three of the pitfalls we have seen repeatedly when American pastors and evangelists visit Asia under the umbrella of national church leaders:

THE DANGER OF GETTING FALSE PROFESSIONS

Pressing for "decisions" in that part of the world is a very serious mistake. Campus Crusade and other para-church organizations, and most of the western evangelists who visit, commit this mistake. Most people in South Asia are absolutely ignorant of the Word of God and the Gospel, and, in our experience, must be patiently taught the Gospel point by point, beginning with who God is, before they can understand enough to be saved. Their natural tendency is to "believe on Jesus" soon after they hear of him, but in doing so they are usually not truly repenting of their sin and idolatry and trusting Jesus Christ ALONE for salvation; they are adding Jesus to their other gods. For an evangelist to visit that part of the world and preach like he would in a western church among people who have at least some semblance of Bible knowledge, is to do a great disservice to those people and produces great confusion. If you count prayers or raised hands for genuine salvation, you will have a huge number of "converts" to report. Large numbers of them, though, probably won't be genuine Christians. I recommend that American preachers visiting foreign countries should proclaim the Gospel as plainly as possible, but don't urge people to raise their hands or prayer some prayer in any kind of mass context. Explain to the people how to be saved, but then let the national Christians work with the hearers after you leave to lead them to genuine repentance and salvation. They can better judge the hearts of those who show an interest in Christ and can better discern whether they are merely adding Jesus to their other gods or are bowing before Jesus Christ as the SOLE God and Savior of their lives.

THE DANGER OF SUPPORTING NATIONAL PREACHERS

To channel a lot of funds to a national preacher in that part of the world is a serious mistake. Those people are incredibly poor, and an amount of money which to us is minuscule, to them can be a small fortune and therefore a very great temptation. I have met dozens of Indian preachers who are channels for U.S. funds, and who have their hired "preacher boys" and evangelistic work. I have met very few who, in my estimation, were using the money properly for the spiritual health of the churches under their care. The tendency is for the following to happen: (1) The head preacher who is the funnel for the U.S. funds becomes wealthy in the eyes of his own people. He might seem poor to the preachers who visit from the States, but in the eyes of his own people, he has found a "gravy train." It has perpetuated the concept in those lands that a good way to make a living is to get hooked into U.S. church funds. (2) The national preachers who are on the head preacher's payroll become his hirelings. It is like welfare. They never seem to get off the dole. Year after year passes, and these evangelists and pastors remain salaried by U.S. churches via the largess of the "head preacher" rather than through the tithes and offerings of their own people. The "churches" they start never become self-supporting. They don't pay the salary of their own workers. They don't build their own buildings. They don't even buy their own bicycles. I have often asked these men why the national churches are not supporting their own men. The answer invariably is that "they are too poor." That tells me immediately that I am dealing with a man who desires to perpetuate the "welfare missions" system. Any church in any part of the world can support its own men at its own standard of living through the Lord's program of tithes and offerings. Those who refuse to train the churches in this matter are creating welfare churches which will never be strong enough to stand on their own feet. This is NOT New Testament missions.

THE DANGER OF BUILDING NATIONAL CHURCH BUILDINGS

It is a serious mistake to fund church buildings for nationals in other parts of the world. A church that is not capable of building its own building has one of two problems: (1) It is not yet established enough to have its own building, or (2) The church members are welfare types who do not have the spiritual authenticity to sacrifice and support for their own ministry. If a missionary builds the church's building, the people will never consider it their own. They will not learn to sacrifice. They will not learn to trust God for miracles. They will perpetually be on the dole.

On occasion, it might not be wrong to HELP another church to build its building, when it is plain that that congregation is doing all it can to build the building, and when it is plain that that congregation would eventually get its own building with or without outside help. But to channel U.S. church funds indiscriminately into buildings in Asia (or elsewhere) will weaken those churches, at best. It is very possible that the churches which are so aided will never be true churches, being peopled only by "rice Christians."

Obviously pastors and evangelists can visit Asian churches and can be a blessing without stumbling into these pitfalls, but these are very real dangers which should be avoided for the sake of the Lord's work.

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